

"LAURA TAYLOR...THE MISTRESS OF THE EDGY, SENSUAL ROMANCE!"

— PEGGY WEBB, Award-winning author of *The Southern Cousins Mysteries*

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AN UPDATED EDITION
OF THE
Loveswept CLASSIC

Heartbreaker

THE WARRIORS | BOOK 3

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THE WARRIORS | BOOK 3

Heartbreaker

by

Laura Taylor

An Updated Edition of the Loveswept Classic

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For Jill Weiss

Dear friend and proof-reader extraordinaire.

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Bliss Rowland spotted an imperfection in the clay she couldn't ignore. She dipped her fingers into a bowl of water and then lightly smoothed one fingertip across the base of a large sculpture mounted atop a pedestal in the center of her studio. She smiled as she stepped back to survey the subtle change.

A life-sized impressionistic piece, the sculpture possessed the flowing curves and hollow representative of the reclining figure of a naked woman. Partially submerged by an advancing tide, the woman appeared as an integral part of the ebb and flow of the sea.

Bliss knew she was her own worst critic. She demanded the very best of herself, and she never settled for less. She also understood and accepted her nearly compulsive devotion to her sculpting, aware that it was a consequence of a tumultuous childhood and adolescence. She'd felt compelled to create order out of chaos, primarily within the confines of her own mind. Her ability to focus, as well as her extraordinary talent as a sculptor, now evidenced itself in the results of a grueling year of work.

Although Bliss felt physically depleted, she smiled as her gaze swept across the spacious studio that now housed more than a dozen original sculptures. She cared little about the fatigue that caused shadows beneath the brilliant blue of her eyes, the disheveled state of her short, curly black hair, or the loose fit of her clothes. She never apologized for sleeping only when she was too exhausted to do anything else, or if she neglected regular meals when she prepared for a one-woman show. Bliss Rowland answered to no one but herself, and she liked it that way.

She circled the pedestal one final time. Drying her fingertips on the hem of her T-shirt, Bliss slowly completed her inspection. When she paused, she lifted her arms to stretch the kinks from her shoulders, neck and lower back. Then, she exhaled softly. The satisfied sound that escaped her blended with the fragrant Saint Thomas breeze as it sighed through the palm trees in the courtyard, which separated her sculpting studio from the main house on the private estate she called home.

Whatever the critics decreed about this collection, Bliss knew that she would experience only pride in her achievement. She felt a deep sense of satisfaction about each sculpture on its own merits, just as she appreciated the fact that the international art community had long ago acknowledged her as a sculptor of originality. In truth, she savored her reputation as a risk-taker who challenged the observer to explore both the subtleties and the boldness of her creations.

Her cell phone chimed, jarring her from her thoughts. She dug it out of her pocket, tapped an icon on the screen, and then stiffened the instant she heard the voice on the other end of the line.

"Bliss? This is your father."

Caution saturated her senses as she said, "Hello, Dad. How are you?"

"I'm fine," Cyrus Rowland answered.

Bliss, long attuned to the subtleties of his personality, heard an undercurrent of tension in the presidential envoy's cultured voice. "What's wrong?"

"Why do you ask?"

"You rarely call," she reminded him with the candor that had evolved between them over the years.

"Is that a criticism, Bliss?"

"Hardly. Just an observation." She summoned patience before she continued. "Your tone of voice gave you away. So, what's going on?"

"Do you remember Micah Holbrook?"

Startled, Bliss said, "Of course, I remember him. How could I not?" She silently acknowledged that she'd measured every man she'd ever known against her memories of Micah Holbrook. No man had ever made the grade. Not a single one. But then, no other man had ever saved her life.

"He's in the hospital in D.C."

Bliss closed her eyes. An ache lodged itself in her heart, and it throbbed like a dull wound. "Will he be alright?" she whispered.

"Right now, that's open for debate."

"What happened?"

"I'd rather not go into the details, Bliss."

"Some things never change, do they?" she remarked. *What do you want from me, Dad?* "Look, I probably doesn't even remember me, but I hope you'll give him my best wishes for a speedy recovery."

"I'm sending Micah to the estate."

She gripped the phone. "What?"

"You heard me."

She swallowed her resentment at his high-handed behavior. Nothing new there, she reminded herself. "Why would you send him here?"

"He needs a secure and private environment for his convalescence."

"I'm less than a month away from my next one-woman show."

"I realize that. Knowing you, though, the work is already done."

How, Bliss wondered, did an absentee father know the details of her life, let alone her work habits? "I just finished the final piece for the collection this morning," she admitted.

"He helped you when you needed him. I want you to help him now."

"That was a long time ago. I was seventeen years old, for heaven's sake. How in the world could I help Micah Holbrook?"

"He saved your life. At the very least, you owe him the hospitality of the estate. Besides, you know better than most people what he's going through right now."

Her father's voice faded. Bliss remembered more clearly than she wanted the blast that had nearly destroyed an entire London block and had taken countless lives on a warm summer morning. Trapped in the rubble of a fashionable dress shop near a busy train station, she had struggled to crawl through the debris and dead bodies. A twenty-seven-year-old American naval officer had come out of nowhere to rescue her, freeing her from the wreckage, shielding her as best he could from the carnage caused by a terrorist bombing, and carrying her to a waiting ambulance.

"Bliss!" Cyrus Rowland barked. "Did you hear me?"

Jolted back to the present, she said, "He saved my life."

"Yes, he did, and now he needs you to help him save himself," Cyrus pressed.

"Why does he need *my* help? Surely there are better places for him than Saint Thomas. His doctor must want to keep him..."

Her father cut in. "I'm worried about him, Bliss. They can treat his body, but not his spirit. The surgery to restore his vision was experimental. He knows the failure rate is close to seventy percent and he's angry and frightened."

"Like Mom," she whispered, recalling the mother whose diabetes had robbed her of her vision and sent her into full retreat from the world.

"Yes."

"What about his family? Wouldn't he prefer to be around people he knows and trusts?"

"They don't know what's happened to him, and he refuses to allow anyone to contact them. Plus, his father's health is failing."

"What exactly happened?" she asked, firming her tone to let him know that, this time, she expected a straight answer.

"You remember that car bomb at one of our Central American embassies last month?"

She recalled all too vividly the accounts she'd seen on news broadcasts about the explosion that had almost killed her father and seriously injured several others. "Was Micah with you on the diplomatic mission?"

"Yes."

"And was he one of the people who saved your life?" she pressed.

"Yes."

"Why didn't you call me after it happened?" she asked quietly. "Didn't you think I'd want to know if you were alright? Damn it, Dad, I had to read the accounts on-line to find out if you were dead or alive."

Silence. More than a minute of it before a more subdued-sounding Cyrus said, "You sound like your mother right now."

Bliss kept her voice even. "Mother is dead. She has been for a long time. I have a life, and I'm tired, Dad. This show's important to me, and I've spent the last year preparing for it. I don't know how much good I'd be to anyone else right now."

He cleared his throat. "Bliss, please do this for me. We both owe him a great deal."

The "please" got her. In truth, his use of the word absolutely stunned her. She couldn't recall the last time her father had said the word when speaking to her, or to anyone else, for that matter.

Like most men accustomed to wielding power on a global basis, he ordered and demanded. He spoke for presidents. He confronted dictators and brought them to heel. He dealt with crises, negotiated treaties, and ended wars. And he'd always made his daughter feel like an intruder in his life, until she'd learned not to seek his approval or attention.

The God's honest truth? Cyrus Rowland was a law unto himself. That much had not changed, and she knew that fact right down to her soul.

"His well-being is that important to you?"

"Yes. He's in a bad place mentally, but you're strong enough to handle him. I trust your instincts and your judgment where he's concerned."

Praise from Cyrus? That, too, shocked her. She released a sigh. "Alright, Dad."

"Thank you, Bliss. I just don't trust anyone else with him."

"He's one of the good guys, and you knew before you called that I wouldn't be able to say no, didn't you?" Not an accusation so much as an acknowledgement of a time-honored truth of the relationship.

Cyrus said nothing for a long moment. "He's one of the good guys. In fact, he's the...best." His tone shifted from emotion-laden to one of brisk competence. "All of the appropriate arrangements have been made. Members of my personal household staff and an armed security detail will arrive with him. Everyone's familiar with the layout of the estate except Micah."

"Is he vulnerable to an attack?" she asked in response to the mention of armed security personnel.

Accustomed to the need to guarantee the safety of senior government officials like her father, Bliss still didn't like the idea of people lurking about her home with weapons at the ready. She always accepted the presence of armed security during her father's infrequent visits to the family estate, or when she periodically acted as his hostess if he needed to entertain foreign dignitaries on behalf of the president.

Cyrus hadn't come to the estate in almost two years, and the memory of the last diplomatic gathering she had handled for him emerged from a locked mental closet she rarely explored. It had taken months of therapy for her to move beyond the incident that had involved one of his guests, a South American diplomat.

The man had been a first class ass of a drunk. He'd over-powered her one evening after the other guests had gone up to bed, dragged her kicking and flailing into the depths of her late mother's room.

garden, and then nearly raped her before she'd managed to slam a fist into his face and break his nose. Her father's security detail had beaten the man to within an inch of his life. Before they'd dumped the bastard's unconscious body at the foot of the stairs to his private jet at the St. Thomas Airport, she had wrested a vow from each man on the security team not to speak of the incident to anyone, especially Cyrus. As far as she knew, they'd all kept their promise to her.

"...a threat is possible," Cyrus was saying. "You probably know that Micah has spent most of his career with Naval Intelligence. He's worked too many highly classified missions for me in recent years to even count, and a man makes enemies in those situations. Enough said?"

"More than enough." Bliss hesitated for a moment. "He's a friend, isn't he, not just someone who works for you?"

Cyrus laughed. "Try not to hold it against him, Bliss."

She couldn't laugh. She couldn't even find the strength to smile. Neither did she admit her sadness that her father seemed more at ease with friendships that had evolved through his work rather than as a consequence of his family relationships.

"When will he arrive?"

"This afternoon."

This afternoon? She wanted to groan. "I assume they're already on their way."

"Yes. They are." After a pause, he said, "Help him, Bliss. Please."

Before she could reply, he severed the connection. Still, she whispered, "Bye, Dad."

Bliss tucked her cell phone back into her pocket. Instead of cursing Fate or shaking her head in disbelief—neither of which would be helpful—she returned her attention to the sculpture on the pedestal in the center of her studio. She drew from the symmetry of her creation the strength and inner calm she knew she would need as she faced Micah Holbrook for the first time in eleven years.

The girl she had once been no longer existed. And the twenty-eight year old woman who replaced her had long ago given up her fantasies and illusions.

** ** *

Several hours later, Bliss stepped out onto the covered patio as she heard the sound of a helicopter. She watched the aircraft touch down on the back lawn of the estate. An expanse of perfectly manicured grass, it separated the mansion from the turquoise waters of the Caribbean.

Uniformed men spilled out of the interior of the helicopter. She recognized several members of her father's household staff, and she assumed the armed men composed the security contingent he had mentioned.

Micah, the last man to exit the helicopter, still resembled a brash Viking adventurer. Eleven years older now, the intervening years since their last encounter had treated him kindly. If anything, Bliss decided as she studied him, he seemed more ruggedly masculine than ever.

She registered first the sunglasses that covered his eyes, and then she took in the rigid set of his broad shoulders. His military bearing showed in his posture, despite his casual attire of slacks, a polo shirt, and leather deck shoes. Bliss remained motionless as two uniformed men stationed themselves on either side of him. Well over six feet in height, broad-shouldered, and narrow-hipped, Micah dwarfed his companions.

She sensed the depth of his resentment when he reluctantly placed his hand on the shoulder of one of the men. His long-legged stride appeared confident. Even as she silently blessed the landscape who'd designed the level, open stretch of lawn, she recalled her mother's fear of embarrassing herself

in front of strangers if she stumbled or fell.

Bliss hated seeing Micah forced to depend on others, but she knew he needed to come to terms with the reality that he might never regain his sight. Squaring her slender shoulders, she tried to ignore her accelerating heartbeat and racing pulse as Micah approached her. Memories of the crush she'd had on him while still a teenager stirred in her heart and mind, but she chased them away.

The mature woman—the internationally acclaimed artist—felt an unexpected desire to sculpt Micah's likeness, to capture the distinctive lines of his strong-featured face in clay. She'd tried several times over the years, but she'd always given up in frustration, not trusting her memory to do him justice. Although she understood why he wore sunglasses, she wished he hadn't felt the need to conceal his bandaged eyes.

She wanted to see as much of his face as possible. Her fingertips tingled with the need to trace the contours of his strong brow, high cheekbones, hard cheeks, and the aggressive chin that made his look willful and stubborn. She remembered him as both willful and stubborn. She also remembered his reckless smile and the sound of his laughter, both absent now. Bliss closed her hands into fists, fearful she might indulge the impulses she felt as he drew nearer.

Her breath caught as a sudden storm of emotions swept over her. The desire to protect herself came out of nowhere, colliding with the rashness of impulse and desire. She calmed herself with effort, assuming the role of gracious hostess with a smile that felt stiff and unnatural.

She felt shaken by her unanticipated need to draw Micah into her arms and simply hold him, but her heartbeat later she managed to reclaim her composure. Bliss possessed a strength of will that often surprised people, especially those foolish enough to assume her petite frame and delicate facial features translated into a fragile character. She couldn't help wondering now if Micah Holbrook would make that same mistake.

Stepping aside, Bliss silently invited her guests into the foyer of the main house with an elegant sweep of her hand. She followed them, pausing in the center of the high-ceilinged room dominated by a gleaming crystal chandelier and a marble staircase that led to the upper level of the mansion.

"Welcome to Saint Thomas and Rowland House, gentlemen. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Bliss Rowland."

She immediately sensed the fury emanating from Micah. It rolled off of him in invisible waves encompassing everything and everyone in its path. Bliss deliberately ignored his hostility.

"Some of you have been here before, so please settle in and reacquaint yourselves with the mansion. The two upstairs wings should accommodate all of you, but I'll leave it to you to sort out the sleeping arrangements. Aside from the studio on the opposite side of the main courtyard, you have the run of the estate."

She approached Micah as she spoke. She knew she startled him when she took his hand. He flinched, but Bliss ignored his reaction and laced their fingers together as though they were old friends. "I'll escort Captain Holbrook to his suite."

"Ma'am, I'm supposed to..."

She smiled at the young man who stood beside Micah. His uniform bore a corpsman's insignia. "Please?"

Instantly charmed, he flushed. "Yes, ma'am."

"May I depend on you to deliver his luggage to his quarters?"

"Of course, ma'am."

"Thank you all." Bliss waited for them to disperse before she spoke to Micah. Once they stood alone in the sprawling foyer, she asked, "How was your trip?"

"Long."

He doesn't remember me, she realized, a combination of relief and disappointment mingling

within her. She took a moment to remind herself that most men rarely remembered mousy seventeen-year-old girls they'd met more than eleven years earlier. She also recalled Cyrus's comment that Micah had been involved in numerous covert missions for Naval Intelligence, and she concluded that more recent violent events had eclipsed any recollection of a long ago terrorist assault on a London train station and shopping district.

"I have no medical credentials," she said, "although I am your hostess during your stay at Rowland House. Cyrus called earlier today. He explained your situation."

Micah remained mute.

Bliss smoothed her fingertips over their joined hands. She felt the answering clench of his strong fingers. "I'll familiarize you with the mansion and the grounds of the estate. You'll need to try to relax and trust me, which is a lot to ask of you right now, I know. Before we begin, I promise that I'll try never to make you feel uncomfortable about your inability to see, but I won't avoid the subject either."

"You don't mince words."

She smiled. "No, I don't. Do you mind?"

He tilted his head, as though he could see beyond the bandages that covered his eyes. She remembered from long ago the piercing quality of his dark-eyed gaze, and for a moment she felt relieved that he couldn't see the hunger in her eyes as she studied him.

"Yes, I mind. I mind all of this."

"I don't blame you. Cyrus has a way of bulldozing people into submission. He considers his judgment impeccable. The rest of us are left to deal with his orchestrations, so I guess it's up to us to make the best of a potentially awkward situation."

He chuckled, but the sound lacked any genuine humor.

"I'll show you to your suite now," she continued, not missing a beat. "I'm right-handed, so I generally lead off with my right foot."

Although pleased that he immediately adjusted his stride to her shorter one, Bliss didn't know herself that Micah Holbrook was feeling cooperative. She expected resistance and anger from him in the hours and days ahead. She understood and even empathized with his inner rage, but she was nevertheless determined to draw him out of the shell into which he'd recently crawled.

Despite the currents of tension she felt streaming through his muscular body, Bliss spoke with a nonchalance that belied the truth of her own chaotic emotions. "We're entering the east wing of the main house. You've probably noticed how cool it is indoors. The floors and walls are marble. The hallway is quite long and six feet wide. There are three suites located in this particular wing. You'll be using the one next door to mine, and we'll share a patio that overlooks the back lawn and the beach. The third suite will remain vacant during your stay."

As they moved down the hallway at a sedate pace, Bliss savored the encompassing warmth of Micah's hand. She remembered the way in which he'd watched over her all those years ago, reassuring her with his presence in the London hospital, holding her hand while the doctor swabbed cuts with anesthetic and then stitched a gash in her right thigh. She still bore the scar on her upper leg, although it had faded to a narrow white line. During those post-bombing hours, Micah Holbrook had become the center of her world. She'd never forgotten him, although she felt certain that he hadn't even guessed the impact he'd had on the vulnerable heart of a lonely seventeen-year-old girl.

"There aren't any chairs or other furnishings in the hallway, so you won't have to negotiate an obstacle course when you leave your suite."

Bliss slowed her steps to pause before a closed door. She guided Micah's hand to the doorknob and smoothed his fingers over it. "We're standing at the end of the hallway now."

He turned the knob and pushed open the door. Bliss inhaled the mingling scents of island flowers and salt-tinged Caribbean air that flowed through the open patio doors on the opposite side of the

room. Taking his hand again, she stepped into the spacious room. Relief flooded her when Micah allowed her to draw him forward with her.

"This suite is a combination sitting room and bedroom with a private bath. The furniture contemporary, and the color scheme is a mix of creams and burgundies." She glanced at Micah, noting the muscle that ticked furiously in his already tight jaw. "I'll always describe your surroundings."

"What the hell's the point?"

"By having mental images to work with, you'll get a better sense of how to move through each room."

He jerked his hand free. "Are you blind?"

"No. You are," she said. "At least, for the moment. No one knows if your condition is permanent so we're going to deal with that reality, rather than pretend you might not be sight impaired for the remainder of your life."

"How in hell can you possibly know what I need?"

"Experience. My method may not be officially sanctioned by the medical community, but it works. And Cyrus trusts me," she reminded him.

He bit out an ugly word.

Bliss ignored his anger and reclaimed his hand. She led him around the room. She showed him the location of each piece of furniture, the walk-in closet, and the bathroom. By forcing Micah to skim his fingertips across each surface they encountered, including the walls, she knew she was helping him imprint permanent images in his sensory memory. Finally, she escorted him to the open French door that led out to the patio, pausing on the threshold.

"You can smell and feel the breeze on your face. It's almost as good as a massage after a long day at work. It's beautiful outside today. There isn't a cloud for miles, and the temperature is in the high eighties."

"I'm tired." Micah turned his back on the view he couldn't see. He stopped abruptly.

Bliss understood his dilemma. Resisting the impulse to guide him, she instead provided him with the means to deal with his disorientation. "There are two chairs and a coffee table approximately six feet in front of you. The low table is positioned between the chairs."

His spine as straight as an oak plank, Micah moved forward. Bliss watched him fight the urge to extend his hands in front of him. Instead, he pressed them to his sides.

"Micah," she said quietly.

He paused, his chin coming up as he tilted his head in her direction.

"The leading edge of the chair cushion is about eight inches from where you're standing. Move slowly and you'll feel the presence of the chair before you actually reach it, but only if you trust your senses and allow them to guide you."

He moved with care and an unusual grace for such a large man deprived of his ability to see. Once he sank down into the chair, he exhaled and gripped the arms. "I didn't ask to be sent here." Anger and resentment resonated in his low voice.

"I realize that."

"Why would you want a stranger in your home?"

"You're my father's friend." *And you saved my life, even though you obviously don't remember me.*

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only one I've got right now." Her gaze fell to his white-knuckled grip on the arms of the chair. She ached for him, but she managed to keep her voice calm as she spoke. "I'm offering you my hospitality and friendship, not pity. I save that for people who really need it."

"I don't want or need your help, and I'd like to be left alone now."

"I understand what you're saying, but I can't allow you to turn this suite into a bunker while you

ignore reality. I have some free time on my hands, and I intend to put it to good use while you're here. ~~Cyrus told me the doctors are uncertain if you'll regain your vision. Since your blindness could be permanent, you need to learn some good habits right off the bat.~~

"Get the hell out of here. Now!" he shouted, his temper finally exploding.

She approached him, her hands joined in front of her as she studied him. "You cannot deal with this situation alone, and turning yourself into a recluse until you learn if the surgery's been successful or not is a mistake. You must prepare yourself for the possibility that you'll be blind. I'm putting you on notice right now, Micah Holbrook. I do not intend to let you hide from yourself or from the world. I know you're angry, and I don't have a problem with that. You're an intelligent man, so be smart enough to make your anger work for you, instead of using it against yourself."

He raked ruthless fingers through his close-cropped, pale gold hair. When he finally spoke, he did so through gritted teeth. "Please just get out of here and leave me alone."

Bliss crossed the room. She paused at the door to glance back at Micah. She felt his panic, but she could do nothing about it at the moment. It would run its course, and then she would try again.

Trembling with an array of emotions, not the least of which was determination, she lifted her chin. She knew in that instant that she would go to war with Micah in order to help him through this nightmare. But she needed to remain emotionally detached, at least for the time-being, and she wondered if she had the strength required for that particular task.

"The evening meal is usually served at seven. I'll see you then. We have a lot of work ahead of us, but I hope you enjoy your stay at Rowland House. Cyrus calls it the perfect place for rest and relaxation. When your luggage arrives, you should unpack your clothes without help from anyone. You'll be less dependent on others if you do for yourself whatever you can."

Her heart ached for him as she watched him continue to grapple with his rage. She thought he looked as lonely and isolated as a jagged mountain peak. While he simmered in silence, Bliss cautioned in a gentle voice, "No one will be allowed to wait on you, Micah. Your rank is meaningless in my home, so don't issue any orders. Anyone who caters to you will be shipped out in a matter of a few hours."

Bliss slipped out of his suite, pulled the door closed behind her, and then sank back against it. Her hands shook, and her heart raced. Tears filled her eyes, but she angrily brushed them away. She covered her face with her hands until the sound of footsteps coming down the long hallway forced her to compose herself.

As she straightened and produced a smile for the young enlisted man who carried Micah's luggage, Bliss knew she'd done the right thing by immediately establishing the ground rules for his stay. She didn't have any other options with a man like Micah Holbrook.

"Ma'am, okay if I take Captain Holbrook's luggage into him now?" he asked.

"Yes, of course, but do not unpack for him. Simply put his luggage in an accessible spot and tell him its location. Then, excuse yourself."

"I shouldn't unpack..."

"No, you should not wait on him unless he's been injured or is in danger of stepping into the path of a speeding car."

Doubt-filled eyes studied her. "You're absolutely sure, ma'am?"

She smiled. "Very sure."

And she was, Bliss realized as she turned and made her way down the long marble hallway.

Micah ignored the young man who delivered his luggage, just as he ignored the passage of time. As he struggled to master the emotions rioting within, he silently cursed Cyrus Rowland for the hundredth time that day.

He remained motionless in the chair, his fists clenched and the muscles of his large body knotted with tension. He seethed with the impotent rage of a man denied control over his own destiny.

Micah resented the uncertainty of his situation almost as much as he loathed the thought of spending the rest of his life dependent upon others. He still couldn't endure even the possibility of the kind of half-life. *He* took care of people. No one took care of him. No one, God damn it!

Neither would he ever accustom himself to being the object of pity. He preferred the finality of death to such an existence.

A short time later, he heard the sound of footsteps on the patio. Micah immediately recognized them, but he refused to respond to Bliss's presence even when his senses alerted him to her position near the open doorway.

"The sun is about to set." She leaned against the doorframe, her gaze captured by the natural beauty of their surroundings. "It looks like a fireball sitting on the edge of the horizon. The breeze has picked up enough to rustle the fronds of the palm trees that border the patio. It should be a beautiful evening."

She turned away from the view and walked into his suite. "When I was a child, I'd stand out on the back lawn early in the morning, take a deep breath, and then hold it for as long as I could. I thought that was the only way to bring all the wonderful scents of the island into my body. My mother used to tell me that the fragrances of the Caribbean sweetened the heart of the person who cherished them the most." She smiled. "It made sense when I was little, but it seems rather silly now."

Distracted from his conflicted thoughts, Micah tried to conjure an image of Bliss Rowland by assembling the puzzle pieces of her unusual personality. Earlier, she'd behaved with all the subtlety of an exploding grenade. Now, though, she sounded almost whimsical. He heard the whisper of a silky-sounding fabric flowing over her body as she moved nearer. Then, he felt her closeness when she paused in front of him.

The next breath he took filled his senses with her personal fragrance. He recognized it as French and very expensive, and it had a greater impact on him than he expected. He told himself that he had to be insane to be attracted to Bliss Rowland, but he felt drawn to her nonetheless. His reaction angered and baffled him, but he felt helpless to stem the tide of awareness that swept over him and suffused his senses.

"Good evening, Micah. Shall we start over?"

He turned his head away from her softly seductive voice. Desire spiked deep inside of him, though rousing his body so profoundly that he bit back an oath. He almost hated Bliss Rowland for making him aware of himself as a man with a more than healthy sexual appetite. He dug his fingers into the arms of his chair, determined to resist her unexpected appeal. He didn't move a muscle, although he did wonder how he could want a woman he didn't know and couldn't see.

"I thought you might like to escort me to the dining room."

"Not hungry."

"That's hard to believe. The chef Cyrus sent down with the rest of his staff told me you haven't eaten since early this morning."

"Leave me the hell alone," he ordered.

"You already know I can't do that, Micah." She sank to her knees between his muscular thighs, reaching out and covering his clenched fists with her small hands.

He told himself he didn't want her to touch him. Yet, he craved her closeness, because it meant the promise of a temporary reprieve from the physical isolation he'd experienced since well before his surgery. Why did she understand, he wondered with no small amount of resentment, his hunger for simple human contact right now? God damn Cyrus for sending him here.

"You have every right to be angry with Cyrus," she said, jarring him as she voiced his thoughts. "He's incredibly high-handed, but I think we both know him well enough to realize that he took control of your life only because he believed you'd lost it. You also have every right to be annoyed with me, especially after our conversation earlier this afternoon. I provoked you in order to get your attention, but my purpose was not to hurt you."

He felt the strength in her slender hands when she forced open his fists and flattened her palms over his. He gripped her wrists, unable to keep himself from treating her like a lifeline even though he loathed the need within himself.

"You have to make a decision, Micah. Either this is going to be a battle of wills between us, or you're going to cooperate with me."

"I've made my decision, so you can leave now."

"Try again," she challenged.

Her voice sounded more gentle than he could bear. "Don't badger me."

"Since I have no intention of coddling you, I guess you're stuck with badgering. Listen to me please. We can't risk catering to you or babying you right now. Cyrus is worried about you. He sent you here because he trusts me, not because he was trying to punish you. He thinks you're important. So do I."

"You don't even know me."

She heard his scorn, and she very nearly recoiled in response to the slap of it. He *had* forgotten her. "I know about you, and I know about all of the little things you once took for granted. I know you can't use a cell phone or a computer keyboard right now. I know you're apprehensive about eating a meal in front of people, just as I know that everything you can't see makes you feel as though you're moving through a mine field each time you take a step. I know you're angry that others are making the simplest decisions for you, like what you'll wear each morning, or how you'll spend your day. I know you can't read the newspaper or a book. I also know you feel trapped and isolated, and you're starting to think you'd be better off dead, because the alternative is to become a burden to your loved ones. What's happened to you would disorient the strongest, most secure person in the world."

He looked stunned, so she paused, giving him a moment to digest her comments. Then, she asked, "Don't I know enough, Micah?"

Extricating her hands from his grip, Bliss started to get to her feet. Shaken by her ability to intuit his most pressing fears, as well as by his anxiety over what his life might be like if he didn't regain his vision, Micah responded instinctively. He reached out with lightning quickness, connected with her shoulders, and grabbed hold of her.

Pulling her forward, he hauled her up and into his lap. She weighed almost nothing, he realized to his surprise. She also didn't protest his aggressive behavior, which surprised him even more.

Her compassion-filled voice continued to echo in his head as he spanned her waist with his hands and held her atop his thighs. He trembled with tension and a startling renewal of the desire he'd felt just minutes earlier. And then he realized somewhat belatedly that Bliss wasn't fighting to free herself. Hell, her breathing hadn't even changed and her pulse remained steady.

Micah frowned. Did nothing shake this woman? Why wasn't she upset with him? Why wasn't she fighting him like a cornered wildcat? Did she think the bandages that covered his eyes made him le

of a man, made him impervious to sexual desire? He assumed the latter, and anger reignited within him.

"Now what?"

Her calm voice stung like salt applied to an open wound. Micah's grip on her waist tightened. He wanted her to struggle against his hold, but she didn't, damn her! He exhaled, the sound ragged with emotions he couldn't even begin to articulate.

What *did* he want from her?

Aside from the driving need to touch her, to reassure himself that she was more than a voice capable of irritating the hell out of him as she relentlessly peeled back his anxieties layer by layer, he finally admitted to himself that he'd reached a point where he just wanted a temporary truce between them.

What he didn't want was her pity. He particularly did not want to be the recipient of Bliss Rowland's pity.

She reached for his sunglasses, eased them free of his face, and tossed them onto the coffee table. Micah stiffened, wary because he couldn't quite figure out her motives, but he didn't try to stop her. His ego protested because she could now see the bandages that covered his eyes, although he sensed that her intention was not to harm or to humiliate him. Nevertheless, he felt vulnerable without the protection of his sunglasses.

Micah also felt every subtle movement of her body. He grudgingly gave her credit for not squirming in his lap, but her innocent movements nevertheless enticed and aroused a body that had gone without the pleasure of physical intimacy with a woman for far too long a time. Desire steamed hotly through his veins. He shifted beneath her, seeking to ease the pressure hardening his sex without revealing his need.

Bliss placed her hands on his broad shoulders. He froze, on guard lest she should decide to touch his face.

"Relax, Micah."

He realized again that she didn't feel the least bit threatened by his anger or his physical response to her. Still unsure as to why she'd allowed him to manhandle her right into his lap, he waited warily for her next move.

Bliss skimmed her hands over his shoulders and up the sides of his neck. Micah experienced a reluctant kind of appreciation when he felt her unexpectedly capable touch. As she massaged the knotted muscles beneath her fingertips, he refused to voice his feelings.

Letting his mind drift, he began to relax, centimeter by centimeter. But a short while later he felt the sting of betrayal when Bliss raised her hands to the sides of his face and pressed her palms to his cheeks.

He seized her wrists, but her whispered, "Please, Micah," made him hesitate.

Lowering his hands, he felt her press her fingertips into his temples and move them in a circular motion. Her touch, gentle, firm, and incredibly effective, seduced Micah in ways he'd never imagined possible. His world, a world of subterfuge and violence, hadn't prepared him for a woman like Bliss Rowland. Whatever her agenda, his senses responded to her wholeheartedly. He wanted—*needed*—to believe, if only for the present, that she was as sincere and caring as her touch implied. Moments later the headache throbbing in his temples began to ease.

Although grateful for her kindness and the soothing quality of her touch, Micah still felt the ravages of his inner war. Not even Bliss Rowland's compassion and sensitivity could quell his emotional tumult or his fears about what the future held for him.

He still felt the urge to ram his fist through the nearest wall, to shout his rage at the car bomb that had altered his life just a month ago. His headache clamored to life again with a vengeance, and he b

back a groan.

Bliss withdrew her hands without warning. "I'm going to stand up now, Micah. I want you to stand with me."

He didn't try to restrain her as she scrambled out of his lap, but he regretted her absence almost immediately. He told himself that, because she seemed willing to understand and accept his constant shifting emotions, he could afford to reward her with cooperation, however grudging. Although he pushed up to his feet, Micah didn't step away from the chair. He simply waited.

Bliss clasped both of his hands. He sensed that she was asking for his trust, but he hesitated. He wasn't the kind of man who'd ever given his trust easily. Trust empowered the recipient, and that power could be misused by even the most well-intentioned person.

"You need to see me, and this is the best way," Bliss explained.

She brought his broad palms to her face and pressed them to her cheeks. More curious about him than he wanted to admit, Micah paused briefly before cupping her head and tunneling his long fingers into the soft curls that framed her face.

"You're not very tall."

She laughed. "Don't let the size of the package fool you."

"You're telling me you're tougher than you...look?" He spat the last word. Micah didn't see her smile fade, but he felt her sudden stillness.

Would he ever be able to simply *look* at a woman again? he wondered. Would he ever again see the naked body of a lover or view the satisfaction that glazed a woman's eyes in the aftermath of lovemaking? His hold on Bliss tightened as he questioned whether he'd ever even have another lover.

"Touch me, Micah," she encouraged, her voice steady, her manner serene, despite the fierceness of his expression and the tension in his hands. "See me by using your fingertips to map the contours of my face. Create an image in your mind to go along with what your senses have already told you about me. Use your senses, Micah. Use the gifts God gave you to recognize the face of a friend, because that's precisely what I am."

Unease swept through him, only to be followed by a sudden hot burst of desire. His hands trembled as hers fell away. She lifted her face to invite his tactile inspection. Micah felt clumsy as he pressed his fingertips to her forehead.

He discovered smooth skin stretched tautly over a high forehead. Nervousness gave way to concentration that those few who knew Micah Holbrook well would have expected of him. As he breathed deeply of Bliss's unique scent, Micah shifted his fingertips to her temples and discovered throbbing pulse points with the callused pads of his fingers.

As he slowly brought his thumbs across her arched eyebrows, he sensed a delicacy in her features that seemed at odds with her assertive personality. He moved lower, his fingers fanning her hairline before he carefully stroked his thumbs over her closed eyes. Dense lashes that reminded him of min feathers feathered over his skin and sent sensation after sensation shimmering across his nerve endings.

"Talk to me." His voice contained a lover-like huskiness as he traced the shape of her slender nose and the elegance of her high cheekbones.

"My skin is very fair, but I tan easily. My eyes are large, blue, and thickly lashed, and my hair is black as ink. I've been told that I resemble my late mother."

Cupping the side of her face with his broad-palmed hand, Micah trailed a fingertip across the seam of her lips, then back over the lush fullness of her lower lip. Her mouth invited a leisurely exploration, and his body tightened in response to that invitation.

He felt her tremble, and then he heard her breath catch. He froze, certain she felt uncomfortable with his touch despite her earlier encouragement. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

Frowning, he asked, "Would you rather I didn't touch you?"

"No, I'm fine." He felt Bliss place her hands over his as though to emphasize that she spoke the truth. "As you touch me, think about the sensory bridge that exists between the sighted world and the unsighted world," she suggested quietly. "We both know there's a seventy percent chance you'll be visually impaired, so you need to give some thought to constructing that bridge yourself. It's the only way you'll ever be comfortable when you travel it."

Micah didn't want to hear about the risk he faced. He needed to concentrate on Bliss, not on himself, so he focused for several silent moments on the shape of her generous mouth, as well as the seductive images that filled his mind and tantalized his senses. His entire body throbbed with desire and purely male instincts told him that making love with this woman would be like her name—bliss.

Micah exhaled, forcing his thoughts away from the sensual hunger that tantalized and tormented him. "You aren't telling me anything I haven't already figured out for myself," he finally admitted a few moments later.

"Do you intend to build that bridge, Micah?" she asked, something akin to urgency in her tone and voice. "Do you believe you're capable of building it? Do you really understand that your mind, your heart, and your will to succeed are separate parts of your being and must work in harmony, but that they are not dependent upon your vision?"

He knew what she wanted him to say, but he couldn't manage the words. He didn't know the true answer to her questions yet. So he remained silent and continued his exploration of her features, feeling her disappointment in the rush of air that escaped her when she sighed.

He trailed his knuckles across the width of her lower lip, simultaneously fascinated and tempted by the soft flesh and the warmth of her breath. He craved a very thorough taste of Bliss Rowland, but he consciously fought the urge to stake a claim on her with the reminder that she hadn't granted him any rights beyond her offer of friendship.

"I don't understand anything right now," he muttered more to himself than to her. Anger resonated in his voice. Driving his fingers into the cap of silky black curls that covered her head and framed her face, he kneaded her scalp like a jungle cat fondling its prey.

Bliss silently slipped free of him. Micah's head came up. He reached out, made contact with her shoulders, and seized her.

"Very good. See what happens when you trust your instincts."

He scowled. "I don't like tests."

"Nether do I, so there won't be any more."

"You're very small, aren't you?"

"And you're quite large," she countered.

"Not for my family."

Turmoil stirred within him yet again. How in God's name, he wondered, would he tell his parents that he might never see again? Hating the thought, he let his shoulders slump.

"I'm five feet three inches tall," Bliss said hurriedly. "I weigh one hundred and ten pounds. I'm single, twenty-eight, and I have all of my teeth."

He realized that she'd sensed his anxiety and was making an effort to distract him from it. He wondered yet again why she even cared about his state of mind.

"Am I supposed to count them now?" he asked, referring to her teeth.

She laughed. "Only if you absolutely have to," she teased, despite his obvious sarcasm.

He smiled, his first genuine smile since his arrival, and tangled his fingers in the tumbled curls that partially covered her nape. "It's soft."

"My hairdresser thanks you."

Concentrating, he shifted his hands and curved them over her shoulders. He recognized the fabric

"Raw silk."

"That's right. What do you hear in my voice?"

He hesitated for a moment. "Approval?"

"What does that suggest to you?"

"You tell me," he answered, although he took her point.

"You have to listen to the words and the emotions in the voices of the people who speak to you. Most people don't realize that they reveal their feelings when they talk. Since you won't always have the luxury of physical contact to gauge the state of their emotions, how you listen and what you listen for beyond the words becomes doubly important."

"Your perfume is subtle, French, and very expensive, which also proves that my nose works. What of it?" He refused to care if his sarcasm offended her.

"Your senses need to work in concert, but you have to allow them the opportunity. For the record, that particular fragrance is my only vice."

"And here I thought you were perfect." Micah smoothed his large hands down her arms, measuring her narrow wrists with his fingers, and then clasped her hands. He felt the flexing strength of his fingers when she squeezed his hands. "You're remarkably petite."

"So you keep saying."

"A man could hurt you very easily."

"You won't."

He heard the conviction in her voice. Although pleased that she didn't perceive him as abusive or a threat, he wasn't certain he liked being so transparent. "How can you be sure? You don't know me."

"Your hands. They say a lot about you."

"Like what?"

"You're aware of your physical prowess. When you aren't feeling angry or threatened, your touch is very light, even gentle." Bliss paused. "The real question right now is whether or not you'll accept my compassion and assistance at this difficult time in your life. It's a new role for you, I suspect."

"What in hell did Cyrus tell you about me?" he demanded, thrown by yet another of his hostess's blunt curves.

"Enough for me to realize that you're always in the driver's seat in every relationship you have, and enough to understand that you instinctively balk at the idea of depending on anyone other than yourself in a crisis."

"You're lying," he accused. "Cyrus wouldn't have said those things."

"It's what he didn't say that was so revealing," she admitted.

"You're spooky, lady. Very spooky."

"No, I'm just me, and I never apologize for being myself. Do you?" Bliss challenged.

"Hell, no!"

"Then we're standing on a level playing field, aren't we?" When he didn't answer, she filled the ensuing silence. "I can't force you to do anything you don't want to do, Micah."

"You'll just talk me to death, is that it?"

Bliss laughed. "Probably," she conceded.

He discovered that he liked the sound of her laughter. It was warm and rich, hinting at a vitality of spirit that he suddenly envied. Almost without thought, he released her hands and lifted his fingertips to the edges of her lips.

Making out the uplift of her lingering smile, Micah felt a sudden burst of apprehension. He didn't want to like anything about Bliss Rowland. He already desired her with a hunger he hadn't felt for any woman in years, and that was bad enough. He also feared becoming her personal cause, a charity case she felt compelled to adopt because of his connection to her father. He feared, as well, becoming

dependent on her.

"Micah..."

"I don't want to like you," he said bluntly, his hands falling to his sides before he lowered himself back into the chair. His frustration with the situation doused his desire like a bucket of water poured over a campfire. "And I'll be damned if I'll depend on you. I don't need or want a nursemaid."

Bliss walked around him to stand behind his chair. She soothed him by massaging his right shoulders. "Of course, you don't want to like me. It's extremely risky, because if you like me, you have to trust me."

"Why?" he demanded. "Why do this? Why become involved in my life? Why put yourself through this? You don't owe me crap."

"And I don't pity you, either," she snapped.

He grabbed her wrists, trapping her and forcing her to hover at an odd angle behind him. "Everyone has an agenda, Bliss Rowland. What's yours?"

He interpreted her sigh as a sign of patience stretched to the limit, and he suddenly experienced a perverse need to push her until he found her breaking point.

"Do you assign motives to every person you meet?" she asked.

"Absolutely. In my business, it's the only way you stay alive."

"I suppose that's true." She sighed. "You are a man of character, strength, and purpose, Micah Holbrook, which is why your work in Naval Intelligence is respected by men like my father. And your success or failure in your current situation is largely dependent on your willingness to accept challenge."

"Now you sound like him," said Micah, his voice like an endless stretch of gravel road.

Bliss flinched. Micah felt the sharp movement as it winnowed through her slender frame.

"For the record, I'm nothing like Cyrus," she said. "I just want to help you."

He jerked on her wrists. "Try again, damn it!"

"You're hurting me."

Stung by her comment, he instantly freed her.

She straightened and moved to his side. "The household staff has instructions not to deliver any meal trays to your suite without my permission. You have three options. Come with me now, find the kitchen yourself, or go hungry. It's your choice."

"God damn you!" he shouted.

She slipped a circular object, heavy and cool to the touch, into his open palm. Micah closed his hand around it, his curiosity piqued despite his frustration with her mulish determination to bend him to her will.

"You're holding a pocket watch. Press the stem at the top to open it. It needs to be re-wound once a day."

"I... cannot... see." He ground out the words through clenched teeth.

"Don't be obtuse, Micah. It doesn't suit you." Bliss walked away, but she paused in the doorway to the patio. "Last chance for the evening meal."

He sat still and silent until she slipped out of his suite. He listened to her departing footsteps as they faded away. Only then did Micah open the watch and smooth his fingertip across its face. And for the first time in almost five weeks, he knew the exact time.

Bliss hated losing her temper, and she sternly reminded herself that Micah's needs took precedence over her own inner emotional turmoil. Although she ate a solitary meal in the dining room and spent the remainder of the evening in her studio, she continued to feel his presence.

She chided herself several times that she had to get beyond the magnetism storming her senses, but she suspected she was destined to a tightrope existence for the duration of their time together. She doubted that her heart would allow her to ignore the feelings Micah evoked in her. It never had during the preceding eleven years.

Although still restless and on edge, Bliss returned to her suite well after midnight. As she showered and dressed for bed, she realized how easy it would be for her to fall in love with Micah again. But she would risk far more as a grown woman than she'd risked as a teenager in the throes of her first crush. She realized, too, that secret dreams and private yearnings wouldn't satisfy her this time. She would want more—need more—if Micah responded to her.

Afraid of her vulnerability, Bliss absently studied her reflection in the bathroom mirror. She saw her brilliant blue eyes that were shadowed by fatigue and haunted by memories of abandonment by the people she'd trusted. Her chin trembled until she clenched her teeth and glared at her own image, proclaiming herself a fool for wanting a man she couldn't have.

Emotions submerged for many years beneath an independent lifestyle, inherited wealth, creative success far beyond anything she'd ever anticipated, and her hunger to be loved without motivation strained to burst free. Bliss swore, the word a hushed, wretched-sounding whimper in the silence of the night.

Turning off the light, she walked into her bedroom. Moonlight spilled through the open patio door and across the marble floor. Hearing footsteps, Bliss paused halfway to her bed and then detoured to the open French doors that led out onto the patio.

She assumed it was probably one of the security guards checking on Micah, but she decided to be certain. Cyrus had voiced his concern about Micah's safety, and she didn't plan to ignore the situation when his threat perception skills and overall awareness of his surroundings were so compromised.

She hesitated when she recognized the man pacing the patio. Smiling, she experienced a moment of pure pride in him. Micah had left the relative safety of his suite. Although he hadn't gone far, Bliss considered his presence on the moon-washed patio a positive sign. He'd grown tired of hiding.

His ability to navigate the patio without hesitation told her he'd carefully inspected the area, discovering in the process the placement of a few pieces of wicker furniture, a table and four chairs, and the flower beds and palm trees that bordered the spacious outdoor retreat. She said a quiet prayer that he would one day be able to enjoy the view of the back lawn, the beach, and the turquoise beauty of the Caribbean waters. Until then, Bliss intended to teach him to maximize his other senses, even if he wound up hating her for her efforts.

After snagging an apple from the bowl of fruit on her desk, she paused in the doorway that led out to their shared patio. She waited in silence as the night breeze ruffled the hem of her white silk nightgown. Micah paused less than a minute later, his head lifting as he turned in her direction. Wearing the same clothes he'd traveled in, he looked bone-weary, ruffled, and wary.

Bliss moved on bare feet across the patio. Aware of the importance of signaling her exact location at all times in order not to disorient him, she remarked, "You've had a long day. I'm surprised you aren't asleep."

"I'd like to be left alone." Micah turned away from her, extended his hand, and moved in the

direction of the double doors to his suite.

"I witnessed what happened to my mother when she lost her vision a few years before her death. She was a diabetic all of her life. She coped really well with many of the limitations her illness imposed on her, but when her vision started to fail, she grew intransigent and angry."

He stopped suddenly. "Is that what you think of me?" Micah demanded. "That I'm intransigent and angry?"

Bliss knew better than to answer his question. "Mother shut herself away from the world. She stopped traveling, she refused to socialize with lifelong friends, and she quit inviting people into our home. I was a senior in college at the time. When she didn't attend my graduation ceremony, I knew something was terribly wrong, so I came home. She'd kept the truth from me for several months, and the servants had honored her instructions not to inform me of her situation."

She sighed, the memories coming back full force as she walked to the edge of the patio and looked up at the stars that studded the night sky like diamond chips. "I did and said everything I could think of to persuade her she was strong enough to handle what was happening to her. Mother fought me tooth and nail. It took months, but I finally reached her. In the end she fought the battle of her life, and along the way we both learned what she needed to do to compensate for her vision loss. We did it together, Micah. And Cyrus sent you to me, because he knows I've never forgotten what she went through. The primary difference this time is that you and I don't have months, because your survival could be compromised by the same people who tried to murder Cyrus in Central America or by any number of terrorists who've put you on their hit lists."

Bliss placed the apple on the round patio table as she moved past it. And then she paused a few feet from him to await his response.

He turned slowly. And he moved forward with care, but without hesitation. "I've known Cyrus Rowland for a long time. He's never even mentioned your mother to me. And I can count on one hand how many times he's mentioned you."

"He wouldn't. He's very private. Besides, they divorced before you ever met him. If you think about it, you'll recall that he never discusses his personal life with anyone. I was five when the marriage ended, and they only saw each other a handful of times until Mother's death. As to his mentioning me, that's not important."

"So you lived with her after their divorce?"

"That's right."

"Here?"

"Part of the time. I attended schools in Switzerland and England while I was growing up. Mother kept apartments in Zurich and just outside London. I enjoyed traveling with her during summer vacations and other holidays. What I never realized was that much of her restlessness was caused by pure loneliness and her fear of a premature death because of her diabetes."

Micah stood beside her. "You don't like to travel so much anymore, do you?"

His insight pleased her. "Not at all. Other than a periodic trip to visit friends or for a gallery show, I stay rooted. I'm a nester at heart, and I really love Saint Thomas. It's my home, and I couldn't ask for a more beautiful one." Bliss inhaled deeply of the fragrant humid air currents that flowed over her before turning to study Micah's profile. "What about you? Is there a place you particularly like, a place that gives you a feeling of belonging whenever you're there?"

"I used to feel that way about the Pacific Northwest, but that was a long time ago. I've lived a pretty transient life since the Naval Academy. In my line of work, you learn not to form any permanent ties to people or to places."

"Sounds lonely," she observed.

Shifting sideways, Micah extended his hands. As he reached for Bliss, his knuckles brushed across

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